MUSEUM PIECES

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MUSEUM PIECES

poems by
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poems by
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MUSEUM PIECES

1.
The desk
has words
etched in its veneer,
tiny buff worms,
a mess of dreams.

The owner was, you guess,
a famous poet,
an inventor.

Wrong. But, better still
(according to your romantic sense)
an ambassador. The British
Envoy to the Caribbean, 1702-
1710, staunchly faithful to Queen Anne.

Ambassador Sir Roger Boult
was shot through the heart
by a mistress who cried "Traitor!"
as the gun went off.

The desk was shipped from Kingston
and sold to a dealer
in Canterbury.

But perhaps you were right
in a way. Sir Roger may have
written verse. A few words are
still decipherable
where his pen pressed hard on the paper:
Honour. Thighs.
Ebony. Darling.
(and what's that?)
In-de-fat-ig-able?

MUSEUM PIECES (continued)

2.
The periwig
had all the possibility
of topping dignitaries.
Instead, a pensioner
bought it on a senile spree.

In its short career,
it bobbed from coffeehouse
(it fell off twice)
to whorehouse
(twice it was removed)
to park bench
(left mysteriously to wither).

The younger children almost
tossed it to the ducks; but Rupert,
being twelve, snatched it up and
took it home. His father said,
"A periwig? No one wears them
much these days. Keep it, son,
as an investment."

Rupert became an under-secretary
at the Ministry of Defense.
In 1904, while turning out a drawer,
he found the wig,
and sold it for
a hundred punds to pay
a gambling debt.

MUSEUM PIECES (continued)

3.
Aurora's skirt
had five pleats--
not stitched--
it hung that way
as satin goes
instinctively.

In her best mood,
Aurora would twirl
(I'm told)like a mad thing,
would arc up the pleats
like willing branches
to summer air.
She'd laugh
(the tease)
and run behind a tree
she'd calculate
the nearness of.

The skirt had sixty years of life,
its mistress only eighteen.
I took it to the cleaner
who advertised a "special."

It disintegrated
like a bird flattened under wheels,
the five pleats
snapped in a feathered tangle.

"Sorry," said the cleaner,
"You should have taken it
to the Museum. They know
about such things."

NEWLY BLIND

I am a man of taste and have
many lovely things around
my house. My friends would say
that all my life I've cultivated
beauty far too much--handsome friends,
dashing lovers--I sometimes think
that's why I'm doomed no more to
see. Now I have to search
for beauty that's within.
Seeing with the heart is hard.
I fear I'l1 never learn the art,
be confined to quick encounters,
helped and helpers. I cannot tell
if they are ugly or have charming faces,
those who guide me over crosswalks,
into elevators, down into the
subway. I cannot sense if,
could I see them, they'd be
the ones I'd trust,
though some I get to talking with,
exchanging numbers. I have to go by
timbre of voice, by delicacy
of touch.

GENTLENESS

I disliked him from the start.
He never looked you in the eye,
screamed at the dogs
and kept moving things
my frierld (his roommate) had placed
around the house with care.
He drank too much, wore
sunglasses by candlelight
and sulked. When he went
off to work, the house became
a home.

But one night
when I came back with a rose--
wrapped in tissue paper--
someone had given me for
reading my poems, and I
forgot about it because I was
weary, I went to bed and found that
he had put the rose in a crystal vase
on the bedside table and added
ferns, arranged them even. And so
I felt ashamed and thought
for everyone there should be a rose,
a rose on the bedside table,
and that small part of him
that thought to put it there was
not so small, was kindness even,
gentleness.

THE EMPTY HOUSE

'Brush the leaves off your coat,'
you say, as I wait for you to
unlock the door. 'Or they're bound
to find one. And let's make sure
the wheels on your wheelchair are
absolutely dry before you come in.
Otherwise they'll spot the tracks.'
I'm incredulous at your fear--
you've just turned forty-three.

1 wheel around their living room.
Many photos on the desk--but none
of you. Your parents are landscape painters:
well manicured pen-and-inks on the walls--
signed and titled, numbered, ready to
show. The bathroom has monogrammed
sets of towels for guests, who,
you tell me later, never come.

1 feel like peeing on the carpet
or setting fire to the tablecloth.
I want to leave them a note saying,
'Notice your son? He is a kind man.'

They will return in the morning from
Brazil to resume their clean lives,
surrounded by woods chaotic
from a recent storm. How, I wonder, do people
come to separate themselves like this?
After dinner we scrub, sweep and whisper
our way out of the house.

I hope I've left a track or two. Ah,
but then they'll scold you: 'How dare
you bring guests here without our permission?
And no more bicycles. We could have
lent you the car--you only had to ask.'

TO A CHILD AFRAID OF THE DARK

The night bell tolls
but no one dies;
the old dogs howl and are lost
but will slouch home at dawn.

Answer the ghost's question.
He waited all his life
to visit whom he wished--
the innocent, alone,
child that needs night-fathering.

Lead your dream acquaintance
to the morning field,
the playground,
after other children go.

Your heart is an unnameable presence:
the infinite et cetera of stars.

THIS SPRING

As usual I'm emerging
from the secret corners,
the antique doorways.
This time it's subtle--
no cure-all or wild green euphoria;
rather a careful opening--
the growing confidence of the tulip,
in stem however frail.

I don't look to fall
in love or out of it but
seek only calm changes
like geese scooping future air
and descending on the scented estuaries.

THE MUSHROOM GROWER

tends his tiny phallus-fists
ponders with flashlight the rows
of sleeping foetuses as if
he had entered a giant womb
of all the waiting babies,
the mid-wife making safe all
future life.

He grunts. He whistles
softly. 'Ah, my babes,' he thinks,
'my dangerous thrusting flesh
pods, trust the dark. Dream on
in my heart's womb. I pray
for you in my house on the hill.
Soon enough I'll wrench you
into the cruelty of day.
You'll be betrayed by me,
sold to the mouths of day-lovers...
Some mornings I can't sleep
thinking of how I exploit the night,
that lets nature be itself
uninterrupted. Grow, my little ones,
and make me rich. Night is not
guilty: I will take the blame.'

LINES WRITTEN AFTER
GIVING A TALK TO SENIOR CITIZENS

When I said
The old have wisdom only for themselves,
I meant the self knowledge of
the fig tree, that coils for light
around the evening gable and
like a sad hotel shelters
its few loyal sparrows
and the parson's young widow who
comes each anniversary
and sits smiling in its shade.

1 envy that tree
in mad moments
like when you catch yourself singing
gibberish on the sidewalk
like Dickens on a night walk
or Elgar on his hills.

Already I've outgrown the forlorn
nocturne of rivers
and the sad-eyed men
who can't sleep because of the poems
they can't write
in the unkempt gardens of their heads.
I'm not a fellow to the bell
book-and-candled night
not in the lists with lovers.
Let them talk.

I'm burying the furniture of dreams,
my past's iconography--
the mossy ladders to the loft,
the muddied bicycles
by the lost metronomes of gates.

THE BAD CHILDREN

Mother, we won't
ever brush our teeth again,
or say those silly prayers;
we'll read naughty books
by flashlight under the covers.
Then we'll open the window,
climb down the fire escape,
and joyfully risking pneumonia,
run out naked under the moon
into the Field of Lilies,
where the Real Christ will be
waiting, arms outstretched,
ready to play.

ELEGY

(for Richard Alpers)

If there were a word
that meant
gentle innocence
that meant
frail bird with eyes ever watching
that meant
child's hands reaching for red flowers
that meant
kindness in being and doing
that meant elegance without conceit
that meant
delicate breeze in the catalpa tree
that meant
the crafted blondness of light
that meant
tremulous voices translating the stars--
if there were a word
it would be Richard:
RICHARD
the word given to us.

THE ENTICING LANE

If I should be told,
suddenly and quite unceremoniously,
that I too had The Disease,
I would think, over the years,
I had complained too much--
the phone's ringing constantly
(lucky I was to have
so many friends),the hours of my job
(fortunate 1 was to have
a job I liked),
the lover leaving
(ah, but he was here,
wasn't he, and in my arms
for so long?).
I should have lived in
the moment, kept a secret
corner for myself to breathe in,
allowed my life to blossom
at last--each leaf uncurling
wet with secrecy to dry
in the spring air.
I should have taken more risks--
old stick-in-the mud that I am--
a balloon trip over the estuary;
speaking up on behalf of the
deaf-mute man at the bank who
was so rudely abused by the teller;
that antique bowl with red
peonies on it that I could
have bought in a shop in England.
But I let myself be dissuaded
by the sensible people.
I should have sought more balance--
silence/laughter,
cool shadow/hot rain,
nights drunk on someone/nights
alone with the dark's quiet watching.
I should have followed intuition
to the Nth degree and trusted it,
kept to that singular path, the enticing
lane with lush hedges, ripe fruit
and wafting scents, that is always there
in the heart's eye and I could have
walked it, always prepared,
even into Death's Unknown and
still have been content, peaceful
as a child dawndreaming by open windows
before the others are up and everyone,
even the child, is wrenched into the world's
bombardment, the maelstrom of appointments
which constitutes a life.

THE SUNDAY CARILLONEUR

A light touch, and Heaven
and Hell reverberate,
I'm the earthquaker, the tornado
maker. Trees arch, buildings sigh,
the hearts of the faithful swell
and the sleepers curse--those tone-deaf
atheists stop their ears.

After my hymns, a silence like thunder.
I hurry home on velvet feet
and raise the latch with satin hand:
Hush now, heart,
and count your blessings.

FABLE

Four young horses,
free in a field,
bruised arms of sun,
shattered backs of shadow.

Then, in deep-eyed thought,
with slow turn of neck,
each decided on a territory.
Two chose to live in shadow:
one, a limestone rock,
one, a twisted alder tree.
Two chose to live in light:
one, sun direct,
one, light reflected from the rock.

Those who chose rock-shadow and rock-light
mated,
produced quiet offspring
at the margin of demi-shadow,
content with limitation.

He who picked sun direct
grew weak and sightless,
stumbled over ragged stones,
died young.

She who chose the twisted alder tree
outlived them all,
was not content
and grew distracted,
a child of insight,
ruminating years.

NOSTALGIA

Down the eternal street
we totter frail and laundered
peering myopically about us
as if we were returning
for something we had lost--
in the air somewhere near here--
a particular dust mote,
a high red window in a
perhaps-dreamed-of wall.

We do not like what we are;
we do not like anything
except what is unattainable
in the heart's photography,
a faded album,
locked away.

We wander into the blue
church of cherry blossom
remarking not conversing,
pointing to the hopscotch players
in the orange light.
We are still hoping for
the Royal Stranger,
purple robed and smiling,
to appear in our path
to answer our question about
the purpose of still being here
after all the important things
have been said and done.

THE FAVORITE PLACE

You look at the absence
at my side--the air
that might have been an arm,
the sleeve of emptiness
neatly pinned.
You are curious--I imagine--
as to how I lost it:
Was I born without it?
Was I right-handed?
And do men not ask me out
because of it?
Have I had children and, if so,
could I tend to them as a mother should?
My face is good you notice and I
have nice long legs. I might
have been a model but all because a
lover left me at eighteen
I tried to throw myself
under a train
and missed.
They found the arm on the platform;
at the hospital they tried to sew
it back but the flesh didn't take;
and I was cut off too high up
for prosthesis:
I learned to write left-handed,
I carried my babies in the
crook of my left arm;
I do have sex, thank you, and my
husband has no complaints.
Sometimes he kisses the space where
my arm used to be and says "This place
is my favonte: because of this I hold
you especially mine; you are whole and
you are beautiful as if you had been
born this way.

TO SYLVIA PLATH

I hear from a friend of yours
that you were witty, laughed a lot,
adored your babies and wandered
waif-like in the Devon lanes,
culling roses from their banks--
and yet I never read of it.
Difficult, impossible perhaps,
but you stared them down
and sang of them, your accolades--
bright planets that you loved
to pose among, fending off
the witches of the high moors,
those jealous biographers
of the dark, whose wailing
finally claimed you. How you
danced upon their sullen graves--
eerie and triumphal--
before you sank
into your own..

AUGUST

Under the Catalpa Tree, fanning itself
like a jaded peacock, you tell me
a story you have told before:
it concerns an old man of Tuscany who said
he valued love more than his riches.
He gave away his riches to his boy lover
who invested them, doubled them
and left with the money in a boat
with a yellow sail. The sail was so
yellow you say that it blazed like the sun;
like the sun, I repeat, snapping
off grass blades and arranging them
in a circle on my lap. And the old man, you say,
was left to wander distractedly and beg
in the streets. The old man's name was
Alonzo known ever after as The Great Lover
and the boy lover's name was Giorgio
known ever after as The Crafty One and
he married a mulatto dancer in Madrid
and was never heard of again
and I look up at the catalpa tree
which drops a leaf courteously in my lap
in my circle of grass blades and I say
Come to the point: tell me
you're leaving me.

THE MYSTERIOUS BARRICADES

What is it, my love, makes us turn
from one another, despite our caring,
and lose forever what we had?
How can we pass through the mysterious barricades?

At the end of memory's path
would lie a jewelled answer;
and the heart's tip, could we sharpen it,
would cut through all the layers of longing.

Through those veils
is the lover of a lost dream;
is the piece of jade
in the mandarin's palm..

THE LAKE

If only I could change
like the lake--
dark-light-dark--
a broadening smile.
They could go crazy
on the banks;
shout; turn
cartwheels. Still I
would be placid,
for all their
coming and going.

RECOVERY
(in memory of Troy Davis)

Finally we are loved--
friends call,
bring unexpected gifts
of zinnias, figs and
photographs.
We are tactful
though we retain a
passion red and thorny
and may blossom
suddenly when challenged.
We seek clarity
as the lark blue ether
or the salmon their clear streams.
Time takes our peccadilloes
like a scoop of flour
and scatters them
into the wind.

DEATH OF A NUN

The sisters hand out roses
in the dawn--petal by petal;
attrition narrows their eyes--
like nutmeg
fasting wrinkles the soul;
behind bars
the moon flashes;
water makes huge sounds
in the chipped cup;
their feet tap
extremely--
a blind's drawn down,
the safety of their whispers,
an eclipse;
beyond leaden clouds
the wind slides angels
down its glassy banisters.

THE FOLD OF SKY

Inside the fold of sky
they tell me dark birds are swirling
like lost surfers in Pacific waves;
they dive and rise, dive and rise,
their cries the cries of old pain--
widows cradling their sons
dead in a useless war,
children lost in the white plains
of sleep. The birds are hidden
from us like our own death
until its own time; their song
is distant, barely audible,
but sometimes it comes
as our name called behind us by
a passer-by, sometimes as a screech
of tires in an almost-accident.
We know the birds are there
waiting for us in the fold of sky
until we enter it. Some say
they will attack us,
ripping the flesh from our bones,
plucking our eyes from their sockets.
Some say they will not be birds
as we had thought but angels
circling us softly,
wafting us upward on their wings,
singing harmonies unlike any
we have heard on earth.
Others say there will be nothing
but the fold of sky
and we ourselves will turn to
spirit-birds and our call
we will send down to you,
the call of triumph, the call
of tragedy, out over the tiny revolving
globe of earth, and we forever invisible,
just as it should be, just as it was
ordained by fate, by virtue
of our grace.

ON SEEING VERMEER'S 'OFFICER AND LAUGHING GIRL'

I know that she let him in at the back door
that they don't have much time.
Perhaps her mother is out on an errand.
Perhaps he's been suddenly drafted.
I'm sure he's in the middle of a speech
which he's well-rehearsed:

> 'You're so pretty.
> So alive and spirited.
> I have a gift for you.
> It's nothing much.
> But I bought it in the Indies--
> A bracelet made by a blind girl...'

Will her mother come home and surprise them?
Is he a philanderer?
Do they marry?
Is he killed in the war?

I'm glad the officer has his back to us,
remains anonymous, and that the girl is caught
forever in the delicate flush of her delicate lust,
in love and falling
for the first time.

ON LISTENING TO A RECORDING BY PADEREWSKI

The notes fragile
like forgotten lace.
Sentimentality became the Edwardians.
It was an age of maxims:
'Put your best foot forward.'
A generation of young fathers
with no idea of leaving home.

Mr. Sutcliffe saved his pennies,
took his daughter Lily
by train from Halifax
to hear Paderewski play
at the Albert Hall.

Lily, now ninety-four,
puts her head on one side
and shakes a finger for emphasis:

"The funny thing is,
I don't remember a note
of what he played.
But, oh, his hair!
He had a shock of chestnut hair!"

Lily gives me the Paderewski record:
"I won't be needing it much longer!...
You know in all my life
I don't regret a single day."
She laughs.
"Well, maybe one or two...
But not Paderewski day.
I can see him now.
All those years ago.
All those years...".

THE BLACKSMITHS

What's become of us?
Iron shoes nailed to our palates.
our fingers burned to stumps.
Numb to the veined ripple of horses' flanks.

They say that men will ride forever,
Stopping for help in our dark forges,
And we will send them out shimmering
In spring air.

But we outlive ourselves,
Sting the earth like old snakes.
We stutter the first word again:
Mother Father Horse Stable.

No one remembers us remembering
The sunlight slid into the wall.
The cockerel exhales our last rites--
A cold breath at the manger's edge.

AUTUMN

My coat no longer keeps me warm:
To spite me, it clings to the solace of its hook.

The candle's scent disappoints: It's not the heart
Of a night chrysanthemum.

I collect coins, I'm tallying the profiles--
Roman senators, worth so little.

A spider's spun her web at my window. She counts
her victims--a fly, two mosquitos, and a gnat.

After all these years I still see
Your goddam shoes kicked off in leaves.

TRIPTYCH: A JAPANESE SCREEN

for George Evans

In a maelstrom of strokes
the monk becomes
his own brush whisper,
his own ink flow,
a mumbo-jumbo of signs:
this is his dervish,
his ultimate song--the brush falls
the dizzying
scroll cascades
to the floor...

In the morning he wakes
laughing,
tears up the scroll
and flings it from the balcony...
the pieces float uncertainly
like fledglings trying air,
like new snow.

He has given up calligraphy,
has become a swordsmith,
and late at night,
drunk,
he tells this story of himself:
'it was my finest gesture,' he sighs,
'The closest ever I came to loving.'

ALL I NEED TO KNOW

Foetus in a jar:
Love in a glass case.

1 don't like the look of it;
I know I was conceived
Immaculately
Born at the age of three.

Love's a child
That can walk
And say his alphabet.

(for Henk van Kerkwijk)

PEONIA

(after the painting by Beatrice Ost)

Everything is falling in blue
moonlight--the cellophane flowers,
the tipsy black vase,
the lipstick (uncertain little phallus),
the mirror with its lips
reflected or painted on we cannot tell;
but someone's here, right where
we're standing, who knows the answer
and she's laughing: "The joke's
on you!" she's saying, her hot breath
in the moon-blue dream-
room loneliness.

VALENTINE'S DAY

(after the painting by Beatrice Ost)

Oh, it's not you I love
red-shirted one with
your obvious card, your
scentless roses and besotted
stare that bores me so; nor you
who spy at me from the sill
thinking you're next in line
when redshirt gets the boot.
My mind's a sapphire eye,
my body a strange fish
only the moon sees.
I'm a tease you say but
actually I'm shy, holding in
deliciously the preciousness
of self. For men of quietness
only--stars on water--I'll unfurl
the whole day of my heart.

PRIVILIGE OF DREAMS

(after the painting by Beatnce Ost)

Under the hat your half
hidden head that holds the dream:
long-ago-dancing with a man
you feel safe with--it is your father
and yet not for he has a red
moustache and a sailor's shirt--
and you are waltzing in a blue-lit
ballroom with green taffeta walls
to a drugged saxophone and the man is
saying "Forever, forever..."
and you are whispering "Yes, yes..."
and when you awake the sun will have
scorched your sprawled thighs
that you despise and you will have
sand in your mouth and you will
remember you are twenty and alone
with Mother watching from the balcony:
Such is the privilege of dreams.

FIVE POEMS WRITTEN AFTER SEEING THE PAINTINGS OF T'AO-CHI

Prelude

Here we only watch and dream:
each morning's spring,
each summer, afternoon.
At midnight, the year turns;
moonlight strikes the mountain's peak
and migrant birds fly south.

1.
The air is white ash.
A bird flies into it
like a broken fig leaf;
its cry is 'Love gone-by,
Love gone-by...'

2.
The rock is blessed
with a rainbow across it
like the hand of God;
you can't separate rock from rainbow,
or the poet from his longing.

3.
Heavy the blue evening on the irises;
they don't even look up
as I pass; they are in deep thought--they
are the evening's concubines,
so dedicated to their duties, almost too
lovely to be seen.

4.
The huddle of old men
are so busy arguing philosophy
they don't see the grandeur above them.
The willow trees mock them,
laughing in the wind
like irreverent children.

5.
The bamboo fronds seem to be moving,
there's no wind or rain;
it's their business to appear busy,
to flutter
with the joy of giving green.

(for David Schestenger)

THE WIDOW

The cold has gnarled her fingers,
the heat has blistered her arms.
The weather has reached her brain
and turned it into a storm cloud.
She wears no black veils,
no fur or feathers, but creeps
naked like a lizard.
She is ugly.
A dog sniffs at her solitude
and takes off yelping.
She smells
incitingly
of absence.

--Nina Cassian

GHOST

A rug of dead buttedlies at my feet,
dead and limp
(they don't experience rigor mortis).
I, on the other hand, am quite healthy:
I've extracted my liver,
plucked out my lungs,
wrenched out my heart,
and nothing hurts anymore.

To become a ghost
is a solution
I weakly recommend.

--Nina Cassian

THE COUPLE

Necks crossed, then parallel,
they. float in slow motion
white and hazel
mingling their blond contrasts,
their floating heads
watching the world from lunar heights,
their fragile legs like antennae,
the bones of their foreheads
breathing sadness and exile
as they circle in their dismal arena,
straining upward to escape
as if pulled by invisible leashes
in love with their heads
but hating their captive bodies.
They separate, they follow
like the languid hours
of the final days
of an extinct species--
giraffes!

--Nina Cassian

FARCE

Allow me to rearrange my bones--
those awkward obstacles
blocking my flesh,

leading it, forcing it into
a pear (my woman's shape)
or starfish (my hands).

Allow my bones to
try out new geometries--
the outline of the world's first
schooner, or the transparent
skeleton of a liliy,
or the genealogical tree
with its posthumous fruit,
its final offspring barren.

Allow my bones to kneel down
when I pretend to pray,
so that the kind Paleontologist
will be fooled at least once!

--Nina Cassian

ELEGY FOR DYLAN THOMAS

Down the pollen-seething sea-hissed path
see him swagger broad-limbed meadowing
sunblanched scampering frail-sky singing
home and fatherlanded loosed from
cynic-hardening fistbanging bars
and anecdoting on the sweet surrender evening
into his shed he stumbles plundering
the blackout of his heart and yanks up
the wordthrusted firey-shouting tenderness
all petals soft medallions and the grief
of knowing too much. Oh it is a glorious
volcanoed avalanching cut-glassed
fat-assed beerswilling prime of a godly
poem ink-wave-shimmering under his
stubby-fisted gentle hands and him to go so
soon ungentle and rageful but not yet
not yet so then guard him good angels still
in this his honeyed sepulchre of night.

THE PERFECT DAY

Will courage drop as a windfall
at the wind's extremity--the thin end
of my whining? Will contentment come
in a hammock too late as stars die
in my mouth and my limbs lose their action
in the sand? Only a malcontent knows
the grinding edge of summer, the cruelty
of breezes, the self-centeredness of shunning weather.

Loss of faith: I let go the rudder
but the waves of childhood overturn
my little boat of laughter--I drown
in my fear like a cat.

Sensible professions come to mind
but numbers in neat rows cuff me at
wrist and neck. I would be rich and
temperate; yet this dreaming has me
grieving for the perfect day--an endless
birthday long denied me, candles all
blown out, the wish fulfilled.

I measure heartache by the chattering
of friends which gusting shakes the
silver stillness of my hours. I garner
loneliness (a frail resolve), pick up
the pen, hear words.

HOMELESS

I had fixed my heart
in a tree,
my eyes in the clouds,
my limbs in a lover's arms.
I was empty.
I had died.
I loved the leaving of myself
in yesterday,
the love was in the leaving.
I do not like this recognition:
to open my eyes is to see
confinement; to move my limbs
is to find myself alone;
to feel morning is to retrieve
my heart--it was so happy
in its nook, its dark nest,
safe from wind, from rain.

THESE NIGHTINGALES, THESE SWANS

In organ-lofted praise
these nightingales net
windy losses in the dawn sky
open as love.
Dredged from sleep's
cruel blunderings
here's a second start for us:
the window flung wide
the grace of an annunciation
the winning of bonus years.
The job botched the love affair
ruined all can be righted now
all begun again and made perfect
as the clear sailing of these swans
in the crisp lens
of the telescope
of the heart.

THE HERMITS

We fear the design of our lives
folded inside the clouds
each piece concocted and unfurled
by knowing and sadistic gods:
we find the rules
unruleable
suggestions futile as clairvoyance
and dream of small studies
in green springed hills
reclusive as old porffolios
a place where making right work
comes easily as verses
from a muse on tap
a peal of bells under water
the whale's cry
a pitch above the soul
an oblivion of stillness
grand as thinking of an ancestor
a mentor gone in shadows
down the years of all imaginings.

WHEN I AM OLD

When I am old I will be
Very nasty.
I will lean out my attic window,
My hair all cobwebs,
And shout, "You're all crazy!"

The children I will turn to pebbles
In the stream
The young women to willow trees
Young men to apricots.

I will mutter around the house:
I am this
Chair
I am this
Flower.
I will be a long dream of childhood
Cry like rain on the sill
Shine like a migrant bird

And each day at dusk,
I will bang a yellow gong,
The Heavens will open,
I will rise and greet them all,
The past's quiet audience,
And they will scorn me
Or applaud me
As they wish.

NOTES

30. On Seeing Vermeer's 'Officer and laughing Girl': The painting hangs in The Frick Collection, New York City.

21. The Defrocking of Pastor Van Dieman: The story in the poem is based on an item in an English newspaper from August 1974. The name 'Van Dieman' is fictitious and is pronounced 'VanDeemun'.

39. Five Poems written after seeing the Poems of T'ao Chi: The paintings were shown in an exhibit of Chinese Art at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, N.Y., N.Y. in 1993.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Christopher Hewitt grew up in the villages of Welland and Upton-onSevern in Worcestershire, England. He was born with a brittle bone condition called *osteogenesis imperfecta* and has used a wheelchair since the age of nine.

Mr. Hewitt received his MFA in Poetry at the University of Iowa Writers' Workshop in 1981. He has published two chapbooks of poetry: The Careless Days, and The Infinite Et Cetera. His award-winning poems have appeared in The New Yorker, The American Poetry Review, The Observer Poetry Prize Anthology, Salmagundi, Cimarron Review, and other magazines. His translations of the Rumanian poet Nina Cassian have appeared in Life Sentence: The Selected Poems of Nina Cassian, published by Norton (1990) and Anvil Press (England, 1990).

Mr. Hewitt has written the libretti for two song cycles, Metamorphosis and Amours, music by Benton Hess, which have been performed in New York City and Oberlin, Ohio. He has also written the libretto for a cantata, Cantata V: Raggedstone Hill, music by Dennis Riley, which has been performed in New York City.

He is currently at work on a book of short stories and an opera libretto for composer Jed Distler. He teaches Creative Writing and English at Fordham University and John Jay College. Christopher D. Hewitt is Associate Editor of Art &Understanding, a new magazine in which writers and artists respond to the AIDS crisis.

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Hewitt

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